LOVING SELF IS THE HARD PART

November 17, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Mark 12:28-34

..."You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
-Mark 12:31 (NRSV)

"You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself."

Twenty words. It's that simple.

If there was a single sentence to recite every day to remind us of what it means to be a Christian - this would be it.

Three loves:

Love of God: worship and adoration and praise.

Love of neighbor: relating with kindness and compassion to the one who needs you; and,

Love of self: which is the pattern, the model for the way you are to love your neighbor.

Simple enough. The love of self is assumed in this formula. It is, you might say, the foundation upon which the structure rests.

My proposal this morning is that, simple as it is, we have a lot of trouble with this one, a lot of confusion and discomfort and occasionally pain, right here at the foundation, with the love of self.

I was reminded of that reading Frederick Buechner's memoir, Telling Secrets, which was published this year. Buechner, as you may know, is a writer who became a Presbyterian minister and continued to be a writer of novels and essays, in addition to books about religion. It was from Buechner that we learned the

phrase, "The Sacred Journey," and that our own lives had spiritual significance. People who have read Buechner carefully have known that his own father's suicide when he was a little boy, has played a very major role in his life. Those privileged to know him personally realized several years ago that there was a crisis of some sort in Buechner's own private life, a life to which he occasionally alluded, but always with circumspection.

In Telling Secrets, however, Buechner decided to write about what was happening in his life; and what was happening was that a beloved daughter was dying of anorexia. Nothing Buechner could do for her was making any difference. "The only way I knew to be a father was to take care of her, to move heaven and earth if necessary to make her well and, of course, I could not do that." [p. 26]

The doctors and psychiatrists told him that the best thing he could do for her was stand back - get out of the way - stop trying to do things to protect and care for her. And that became a deeply personal crisis...as Buechner acknowledged that his father's suicide and his life long refusal and inability to deal with it, to grieve over it, to get angry about it, to forgive it, had made him an obsessive parent. He would take care of his family come hell or high water, as his father had not taken care of him. In the process, he was quite willing to simply forget himself. As his daughter starved herself of food, the author starved himself of anything that might nurture, feed and enrich himself. That was the situation which finally forced the issue of self love.

"People in caring professions," he said, and I think it applies to anybody who cares about others, "are famous for neglecting themselves with the result that they are apt to become in their own way as helpless and crippled as the people they are attempting to care for and thus no longer selves who can be of much use to anybody." [p. 27]

Fortunately, when the real crisis came he was 3,000 miles away from his daughter. Doctors and nurses who were not lovesick were realistic and tough and conscientious and made difficult decisions, forced the issue and she began to get better. Buechner concludes in retrospect that they loved his daughter in a way that was closer to what Jesus had in mind than he had been doing.

"Love your neighbor as yourself," he said really means love yourself at least as much as you would love your neighbor who is in trouble. "Mind your own life, your own health and wholeness, both for your own sake but ultimately for the sake of those you love too. Take care of yourself so you can take care of them. A bleeding heart is of no help to anybody if it bleeds to death."

It seems like it ought be so simple. Love God, love neighbor, love self.

The story is simple enough. A scribe, an ecclesiastical lawyer, comes to Jesus and asks a question. There is a rabbinic tradition in Judaism of asking a great teacher to summarize all his wisdom briefly.

So the scribe asked Jesus, what commandment is the first of all? Jesus repeats the Shema which the devout have been reciting twice a day for centuries and ever since:

> "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.
>
> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."

And then he added another sentence from the 19th chapter of Leviticus:

> "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Simple enough, but people have been pondering it ever since, pondering the mystery that spiritual health and faithfulness to Jesus involves all three, pondering the truth that the three are balanced, pondering the paradox that if they are out of balance - if you love God more than your neighbor, or your neighbor more than yourself or yourself more than your neighbor - all three loves are simultaneously affected and diminished. That is, if your love for yourself is not tempered by love of neighbor, what you have for yourself is no longer love but selfishness. And, consequently, if you love your neighbor more than yourself or apart from a tempering, balancing love of self - what is going on may be some kind of unhealthy dependence on that person, co-dependence, we have learned to call it.

Now, the trouble with this is that we are inclined to think that our religion really means for us to forget about ourselves, not love ourselves so much. John Calvin put it clearly enough. "We are too much devoted to ourselves."

And so, we have concluded that faithfulness implies self-denial, self-sacrifice, which it does. Besides, we are sinners, aren't we? The sinful self is exactly what's wrong with us.

I continue to believe that the classic Protestant definition of sin as rampant egotism, is a valuable and accurate insight into the nature of humankind, and a pretty good analysis of what goes wrong in nations, political systems, foundations. But, in its uninterpreted form, it has produced a fair amount of guilt for religious people. People have felt deeply and profoundly guilty - simply for being human; felt impotent, incapable of any

good, undeserving of any love. A psychologist friend of mine used to tell me that he'd be more comfortable with the Christian Church if we'd make sure we tell the whole story about humanity instead of obsessing about the sinful part: that humankind is blessed by God, that our humanness is part of the created order which the Bible says is good, that our humanity is the only picture we have of the reality of God - made in God's image as we claim to be. He'd be a lot more comfortable in church, he used to say, if the service began every other Sunday with a prayer of human affirmation instead of a prayer of confession. We are, he said, no more totally depraved than we are totally good.

There is a sense in which the Me Decade, the New Narcissism of the 80s was a full cultural revolt against the traditional suspicion of the self, identified with the Protestant, Puritan analysis of sin as too much self love, a kind of cultural correction. But as is often the case with revolutions this one becomes obsessive, exaggerated, a caricature of itself. Suddenly, in the 80s, the self, so long maligned as the source of our sin, made a comeback, became the arbiter of all good. "If it feels good, do it," became a popular moral guideline. "Do yourself a favor. Become your own best friend." Self-fulfillment, self-enhancement, self-gratification became major cultural motifs.

You know the story... greed became respectable. Harvard medical School psychologist, Steven Berglas, was interviewed by Time two weeks ago and talked about "Pathological Narcissism," an impossible need to have and get and own more... which cannot be satisfied and which overwhelms all of the rest of life... a Calvinist nightmare come true... egotism out of control!

We are paying a very significant price for that, by the way. Sex, for instance, which for centuries, was suspect in and of itself, suddenly and dramatically was everywhere; movies, television, advertising. We became instantly and gloriously free to enjoy sex whenever and with whomever it pleased our fancy. There was something terribly poignant - something pathetic - about Wilt Chamberlain boasting about having sex with 20,000 women - the same week Magic Johnson announced his condition as a result of anonymous ad hoc sexual contact. "A matter of numbers," he said.

We are paying a very severe price indeed for a decade which overthrew self-denial and replaced it with self-gratification as the moral norm. I am suggesting that when one of the three loves in Jesus' formula is out of control, the other two ultimately disappear and the original love becomes warped and twisted.

When you love yourself at the expense of your love of neighbor, self love becomes selfishness, self absorption, self obsession.

And when you love your neighbor or your daughter or mother or wife - at the expense of self love - your neighbor love becomes dependence.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the narcissistic excesses of the 80s, I am proposing that the proper love of self remains fundamental to our spiritual health - and it remains difficult. A major spiritual hurdle for many of us is self-affirmation, self-appreciation, self esteem, self-love.

In point of fact, the self that is you was created by God, is part of the creation of God which God calls good, which God dearly loves.

In fact, you are God's creature, God's child. "God loves you," St. Augustine said, "as if there were only one of you to love."

Your baptism is a mark of God's love for you which will never change. You are forever dear to the heart of God. You are what God intended: you are the purpose of creation.

It is not blasphemous to talk about yourself like that. But the opposite may be. It may be the ultimate blasphemy to denigrate your life, to devalue yourself. It may be the final sin to hate yourself. It is surely the final tragedy, to waste your life because you do not value your own precious self.

Dr. Bernie Siegel who is a surgeon who thinks and writes a lot about the connections between physical health and self-esteem says that the societal costs of not loving our selves are enormous.

> "Look around you if you doubt the damage caused by lack of self love. Notice how many people commit suicide by accidents and untreated illness. We're so self-destructive we have to have laws. I call them 'please - love - yourself - laws' - even to get us to wear helmets and seat belts."

Alex Kotlowitz, in <u>There Are No Children Here</u>, eloquently describes the enormous challenge of cultivating an appreciation for any life in a social environment which denies the value of your life... the ultimate tragedy of urban poverty. Children who are told over and over that they don't matter, that their lives are not worth anything, that nobody cares whether they live or die, will choose, more often than not, life denying, life-threatening behavior. Lafayette Rivers has no friends - just associates. Kotlowitz says when children give up on themselves, they also give up on others.

Some of the best things that happen in our Tutoring Program are here. Children not only learn to read and write better, but for several hours a week, learn by experience that they matter to someone: that their lives have value. When that works - when the seeds of value and self-esteem are sown by love of neighbor, love of self becomes a miraculous and transforming possibility.

Sometimes you and I are unable to love God fully, or our neighbors totally, because we've never gotten around to loving ourselves. Sometimes we can't love ourselves because we carry around with us the hurts and burdens of the past, perhaps even a long ago childhood and the effect of it is that our lives are dedicated to winning approval. Sometimes that comes about because of something that happened to us - a parent's suicide for Buechner - sexual abuse - neglect - and sometimes our inability to love ourselves is self-imposed, with its roots in our memory of something we did or something we left undone.

Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary, in a recent book includes a powerfully personal account of how he has lived his life trying to compensate something he did to his mother.

They were very poor. His father died at thirty-one, leaving a wife with no skills, no knowledge of English and six children to feed. She took in ironing and scrubbed floors. But in her pride, she tried to prevent her children from knowing how she earned money. One day on the way to school, Smedes, about eight years old, saw her on her hands and knees scrubbing someone's porch. She saw him. "Hellow Lewis" is all she said and then resumed scrubbing. "I was ashamed of her and she knew I was ashamed." All his adult life he has remembered that moment and the fact that he once wronged a great woman. It took a lot of counseling and reflection to discover that the depressions he suffered all his life were related to the guilt he still felt - for being ashamed of his mother.

Finally, so depressed, he felt as if he were "dangling over the edge, falling where nobody could rescue me with the good news that I was good enough for them to approve of me, I fell into my own abyss."

"I fell into God." He simply heard the good news which we try to say to one another every Sunday... "You are forgiven"... "You are free to forgive yourself"... which means - "You are free to love." A Pretty Good Person, p. 108-109]

And so it can happen. The final word spoken about you and me is a word of love and approval and affirmation. "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole." There is love enough for all of us. There is news that is profoundly and ultimately good.

You are loved. You are esteemed and treasured. Your life has infinite value because it is loved infinitely.

And because of that - even you could love God and your neighbor as you love yourself.

Amen.